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ABSTRACT

In order to reduce community resistance to a multi-ethnic/cross-sectional survey by an 1890 institution and to identify those factors which influenced survey completion, 395 white and 335 black heads of households in 19 middle Georgia county areas were surveyed. Since a suit labeling Fort Valley a "diploma mill" had recently been filed by white citizens and since the performing institution was predominantly black, the sample design was considered crucial and an "informed consent" statement was required by the campus' Human Rights Committee. Strategy employed to avoid community resistance involved: (1) an intensive literature review; (2) use of a stratified cluster sample to permit a representative sample at a minimum cost and eliminate the possibility of creating the impression that only certain residents were chosen; (3) development of a non-threatening title for the study via elimination of words such as "poor", "black people", etc.; (4) preliminary visits to local officials explaining the research project; (5) a pretest to determine whether local or outside interviewers were better received (results indicated outsiders were more successful, but tensions prevented whites from applying). Survey success was attributed primarily to: (1) use of the cluster sampling technique; (2) use of the observational survey; and (3) completing all interviews within one day or less. (JC)

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Community Resistance to Survey Research and 1890 Colleges
and Universities: The Case of Fort Valley State College

Melvin E. Walker, Jr. and John S. Holik*

During the last few years, the involvement of scientists at 1890 colleges and universities in basic and applied research has been substantially increased through funds provided under authority of PL 89-106. A considerable proportion of these efforts and funds has been devoted to the study of social or human problems such as poverty, nutritional status and ill health. Many of the studies in these areas require some survey research involving multi-ethnic/cross-sectional groups (i.e., black vs. white, poor vs. non-poor, etc.). The increased funding for social research at 1890 colleges and universities comes at a time when social scientists are reporting increasing resistance to research surveys, especially those involving multi-ethnic/cross-sectional respondents (Cromwell, Vaughan and Mindell, 1974).

None of the suggested ways of dealing with community resistance to surveys reported in the literature relates experiences of researchers at 1890 colleges and universities. For example, general models ["The Process of Exchange," Hessler and New (1972), "Community Support and Involvement," Josephson (1970), "A Process of Exchange," Cromwell, et al (1974)] used by researchers at 1862 as well as other predominantly white institutions to reduce community resistance to survey research may not be feasible for a researcher at an 1890 or predominantly black institution. The 1890 institutions lack community linkages, such as the Cooperative Extension Service

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and other community action-oriented programs, which are normally associated with 1862 Institutions.

The purposes of this paper are: (1) to share with the reader the strategy utilized in an attempt to reduce community resistance to a survey of a multi-ethnic/cross-sectional group by researchers at an 1890 or predominantly black Institution--Fort Valley State College, and (2) to point out certain factors which appear to have influenced the completion of the survey.

AIM, PURPOSE AND DESIGN OF PROJECT

The primary objective of the study was to obtain information relative to poverty-cycle families (families experiencing three or more generations of poverty) which might be used to develop action programs designed to reduce or eliminate long-term poverty within the study area. The study focused upon the identification of poverty-cycle families and the isolation of factors that may be causal in the perpetuation of the poverty-cycle. The study was conducted in nineteen Middle Georgia County areas which according to the 1970 Census, contained (a) a high percentage of poverty-stricken families, and (b) a heterogeneous population (i.e., poor, non-poor, black, white, rural non-farm, rural farm, and urban). All of the information was collected from household heads only.

The decision to study families with a survey of households in a nineteen county area of Middle Georgia had been made prior to the establishment of the research team. Thus the primary task of the research team was to develop a survey design which would ensure the collection of data from a cross section of the area's population. The sample design and a plan for implementation was for all practical purposes considered the most critical for this study since (a) the performing institution was a predominantly black 1890 institution, and

(b) a suit had been filed in the court by selected white citizens in the surrounding community accusing the institution of being a "diploma mill" just prior to the arrival of the research team, thereby resulting in increased tension between white residents and the institution.

The research team was concerned about developments such as the protection of human subjects, the invasion of privacy, the lack of confidentiality, and the relevance of research findings which were at an all time high [(Barker (1973), Carlson (1967), Executive Office of the President (1967, Gallher (1973), Moore (1973), Nejelski and Finsterbusch (1973), and Sagarin (1973)]. The most critical of these being the nation-wide concern for the protection of human subjects which resulted in the establishment of a Human Rights Committee on the campus of the performing institution. This committee required all projects involving human subjects to obtain a signed "informed - consent" statement from each respondent or participant indicating his understanding of and willingness to participate in the study.

With these odds at the outset, the research team was in agreement that it would be difficult for social scientists at Fort Valley State College to conduct a multi-ethnic/cross-sectional survey in the area at that time. Serious consideration was even given to restricting the study to families from one ethnic group and also to restrict it even further to include only persons from this group who were receiving public assistance. The research team concluded, however, that such approach was unacceptable since it would only generate data of limited value for accomplishing the objectives of the project.

With time and continued evaluation of alternatives, the team finally agreed that a carefully planned design might lead to the successful completion of the survey. Accordingly, this was done and surprisingly enough the result

was an overall sample response rate of approximately 77 percent utilizing a 26 page questionnaire requiring from one and one-half to two hours for completion. The remainder of this paper outlines the strategy utilized in conducting the survey and presents discussion and implications for future survey research.

THE STRATEGY

The first step taken in an attempt to avoid community resistance was an intensive literature review of problems others have encountered in conducting social surveys. Since nothing could be found in the literature which related experiences by researchers at 1890 Institutions, persons who were known to be engaged in social research at selected 1890 Institutions were contacted in an attempt to gain at least some knowledge of their experiences with survey research.

From the general literature review we discovered the following: (a) that it is fairly easy to acquire approval to conduct a social survey within a given area from local governmental officials (i.e., sheriffs, police chiefs, city administrators, school superintendents, mayors, etc.) and other community leaders (i.e., businessmen, clergymen, etc.), (b) that the major source of resistance generally comes from special interest and minority groups and is usually initiated by influentials within these groups, (c) that the title or subject of the research is more often the source of criticism than the actual content of the research schedule or instrument, and (d) that resistance from local governmental officials and other community leaders normally occurs after complaints are received from influentials in the community.

From contacts made with researchers at other 1890 Institutions, the following was discovered: (a) that the public image of the capabilities of research

scientists at 1890 Institutions seriously hampered their efforts to carry out survey research, (b) that research scientists at 1890 Institutions were concentrating almost exclusively on studies of a single ethnic group, (c) that many researchers at 1890 Institutions had attempted to follow--without modification--research models which had been proven successful at 1862 Institutions without considering differences in the Institutions,¹ (d) that the landlord-tenant relationship existing in many southern rural communities had created severe problems for 1890 researchers in several instances (i.e., landlord sees interviewer as an outsider from the north attempting to destroy his labor supply), (e) that the method of selecting respondents tended to hamper progress and encourage refusals, particularly if by chance all households bearing certain characteristics became a part of the sample, and (f) that the respondent was most likely to consent to an interview and respond accurately to selected "touchy" questions when the interviewer was unknown to the respondent.²

Equipped with this information, an attempt was made to develop a strategy for avoiding community resistance. The first task was to develop a method of selecting respondents which would avoid creating an impression in the community that the people being interviewed had been singled out for one reason or another. Researchers at other 1890 Institutions had cautioned us against attempting to select a random sample utilizing a listing of residents or other methods where some households within a given area were selected while others were not. They claimed that this tended to create the impression among chosen respondents that

¹ Peculiarities associated with 1890 Institutions may dictate--as we will discuss later--a different design.

² A possible explanation for this is that the respondent is more concerned about what his neighbors think of him than about what a stranger thinks.

they were being singled out for one reason or another and that this would eventually result in total community resistance.³ After several weeks of literature searches and debates in regular team meetings, it was concluded that a stratified cluster sample would be most suitable since it would (a) permit a representative sample of the vast area to be taken at minimum cost, and (b) permit the interviewing of all household heads within a cluster, thus eliminating the possibility of creating the impression that only certain residents were being chosen.

Having chosen a sampling technique and worked out all details associated with it, the next task was to gain approval of the study from local officials in the area where the study was to be conducted. The research team felt that it would be easier to acquire approval of local officials for the study if the title and related materials were not threatening. Therefore, wherever it was possible, we eliminated the use of such words or phrases as "poverty," "low-income," "poor," "poor people," "black people," "white people," etc. For example, in the write-up used to acquaint the public (local officials, respondents, etc.) with the purpose of the study, the phrase "relative socio-economic status" was used instead of words such as "poor," "poverty," and the like. Further, the purpose of the study was stated as follows:

The purpose of this study is to determine the socio-economic status of families in your community; to determine differences which may exist in the socio-economic status among families by place of residence and ethnic group; to determine factors influencing differences in socio-economic status by place of

³For example, suppose a sample is being taken in a poor to moderate neighborhood where a large number of welfare recipients reside, and the sample by chance ends up with a disproportionate share of welfare recipients. The study could quickly be labeled one to determine future eligibility for benefits and refusal will occur unless undesirable pressure tactics are employed--in which case the value and quality of the data become questionable.

residence and ethnic groups; and to make recommendations on how we think the socio-economic status of persons in the community can be positively changed or improved."

The first question that was raised when this proposal was presented in one of the team meetings was, "Isn't this a form of disguise which Erikson (1967) severely criticized in his comment on disguised observation or to which Polsky (1967) referred to as dangerous and unnecessary?" After considerable debate, it was agreed that this was not the type of disguise that the above mentioned authors were referring to. They were referring to an attempt by the researcher to study one problem while informing the public or respondent that he was actually studying another. This is not the case for the statement presented above. This statement reflects the heart of the study--only stated less offensively.

In order to gain approval for interviewing from local community officials, the sheriff's (and/or police's) offices within the area were visited.⁴ Copies of the research objectives, informed consent statement, and questionnaire were presented to them. The sheriff and police were told that all families within selected areas (clusters) in the particular county (or town) would be visited. The exact locations of clusters, however, were not disclosed, nor were they requested by the officials. There was no opposition to the survey expressed by any of the officials.

Knowing that what had been accomplished so far was nil since community resistance--according to the experiences of other researchers--does not begin at

⁴The sheriff's (police's) office was visited rather than the mayor's or county commissioner's office since it had been learned earlier that the sheriff (police) was the easiest to locate in the rural county, and that once he had received the information, it would then be passed on to other community leaders.

the offices of local officials, but rather it begins when a respondent calls in with a complaint. Accordingly, the next task was to develop a strategy for reducing the possibility of creating resistance among individual respondents. Since many of the sampling clusters were located in rural agricultural areas, it was certain that the landlord-tenant relationship existing in the area would affect the attempt to conduct the survey. For example, it was felt that if a neatly dressed strange interviewer--particularly black--is seen in the area by the landlord, before the tenant has had a chance to respond to the questions or sit for an interview, the interviewer would immediately be labeled a northern radical and would automatically be refused an interview by the tenant, particularly following the tenant's conversation with his landlord. To avoid this, an observational survey was conducted within each cluster prior to the actual interviewing of respondents. During this survey, households which were believed to be occupied by "Influentials," "landlords" or persons most likely to refuse to be interviewed (based upon the appearance of the dwelling, surrounding attachments and any other information obtained through conversation with selected residents of the areas) were identified. When actual interviewing began, the interviewers were instructed to visit these earmarked households only after visiting all other households within that cluster.

The next step in the research process was to select interviewers. In this step one critical question raised was: "Does an interviewer from within the study area stand a lesser chance of being refused than an interviewer from outside the study area?" Information gathered from conversation with selected social scientists tend to differ on this matter. Some indicate that respondents are more likely to consent to interviews from local persons than from outsiders while others indicate the opposite. Comments received from researchers at 1890 Insti-

tutions tend to support the latter. Since evidence supporting either position was limited, it ^{was} decided that this element be included as part of the pretest of the survey instrument.

For purpose of the pretest, an area which was not included in the sample, but located within the general area was selected. Fourteen interviewers were selected from among approximately 60 applicants with approximately one-half of them coming from the pretest area and the remainder from outside the area. During the pretest it was discovered that those persons who were not known within the area received fewer refusals and were able to get better responses to sensitive questions than those who were known in the area.⁵ Based upon these results, interviewers were assigned areas within which they were unknown.

RESULTS, ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF DESIGN

The survey for all practical purposes was a success. The sample design called for approximately 725 completed interviews (392 white and 333 blacks) from the area to assure representativeness. In order to assure the acquisition of 725 completed interviews, 943 households were contacted (568 whites and 375 blacks).⁶ Of these 730 (395 whites and 335 blacks) yielded interviews result-

⁵All of the interviewers used in the pretest were black. Therefore, the question as to whether a particular ethnic group would respond better to an interviewer from that particular ethnic group or vice versa was not examined.

⁶Reviews of previous surveys indicated that approximately 12 to 20 percent of the households would be lost either, (1) because of refusals, (2) household heads not being at home, and (3) selected dwellings as indicated by the Department of Transportation's culture maps no longer exist. Further, it was estimated that between 25 and 35 percent of all white household heads would refuse to be interviewed for one reason or another.

ing in a total sample response rate of approximately 77 percent (69.54 percent for whites and 89.33 percent for blacks). This means that approximately 23 percent (30.46 percent for whites and 10.67 percent for blacks) of the household heads contacted refused to be interviewed.⁷ The remainder of this discussion will focus on describing factors which influenced the results.

The first sign of resistance was observed during the analysis of the first week's results. While refusals were few, those that did occur were among low-income working-class whites. Perhaps the first fault with the design was the failure to include whites among our interviewing staff.⁸ While there is no conclusive evidence that white interviewers would have reduced the refusal rate, interviewers reported at a rate of 9 to 1 that in their opinion, the major cause of refusals among this class of respondents was race. As for blacks and middle and upper income whites, refusals could not be traced or confirmed to have resulted from the absence of white interviewers. The normal expected rate of refusals was incurred among these groups with one minor exception--most of the refusals by blacks came from among the middle and upper income groups and resulted mostly (as expressed in conversation) from their dissatisfaction with previous dealings with the performing institution since many of their children had attended the institution. Whether the presence of a white interviewer would have influenced responses from these groups is also unknown. It was estimated that the absence of white interviewers accounted for approximately 22 percent of all refusals.

⁷One question that might be raised is: Did the refusal rate incurred severely affect the representativeness of the sample? A comparison of selected demographic characteristics of the sample with the 1970 Census has shown that the sample is representative of the study area.

⁸This was not an oversight. The tension between the community and the institution during the time field workers were being recruited made it impossible to recruit whites.

A second weakness of the design was the lack of accuracy on the part of observational surveyors in identifying potential "resisters" within the clusters. In many instances resisters were not identified and consequently, they were contacted too soon. While they did not always call law enforcement or other officials, they did begin to spread, what turned out to be in many cases, false information among their neighbors. In a few cases, this resulted in complete refusal within clusters.⁹ It was estimated that this accounted for about 13 percent of all refusals received.

A third factor, resulting in the largest number of refusals, was that associated with the signing of the "informed consent" statement. About 86 percent of refusals among poor and/or less educated respondents, both black and white, was a direct result of this feature of the design. Analysis indicated that without this feature, the sample response rate would have been in excess of 90 percent. Sixty percent of all refusals was traced to the informed consent statement. It must be pointed out, however, that this feature was not a part of the research design by choice; it was mandated by the local Human Rights Committee.

Finally, it is important to indicate what was concluded to be the strongest aspects of the present sample design. In general, the notion to keep visibility at a minimum was by far the best feature. The success of this survey is believed to be directly associated with the decision to (a) employ the cluster sampling technique, (b) perform the observational survey in which "potential resisters" were identified, and (c) the attempt to complete all interviews in each cluster within one day or less. This conclusion was reached mainly as a result of an analysis which showed that refusals increased directly with the number of times the community (not the respondent--call backs) was visited by the interviewer.

⁹Where this occurred, an alternate cluster was utilized.

IMPLICATIONS

Experiences incurred during this survey tend to indicate that keeping community involvement and thus visibility at a minimum increases the chances at least in some cases of successfully completing the survey. Many nationally sponsored surveys avoid the problem of resistance by leaving the community before they become the focal point of attack (Cromwell, Vaughan and Mindell, 1974). It should be pointed out, however, that the complete exclusion of local leaders is by no means suggested, but rather that more attention be given to the individual respondent since it is usually he who initiates resistance. Providing local leaders with only information necessary for approval and involving them in the research only to the extent necessary for acceptance may yield higher rates of interview completions.

The Fort Valley experience tends to support the idea that more consideration should be given to the cluster sampling technique as a method for reducing or avoiding resistance to social surveys. This sampling technique reduces the possibility of respondents mistakenly assuming that they are being singled out for one reason or another. Further, this technique is an aid in reducing the visibility of researchers in the community. It was possible in the current study for instance, to complete all interviews within a cluster within one day or less. Finally, the study supports the use of the observational visit as a method for spotting potential resisters in order to avoid community resistance.

FINAL NOTE

To begin, this survey was done partly in a rural area and partly in an urban area composed mainly of migrants from the surrounding rural areas. The design outlined worked well in the rural communities but had its limitations

in the urban areas. For example, in highly urbanized areas, it was not easy to keep visibility low. In addition the organization of local officials was more complex. This resulted in a partial breakdown of the procedure at one stage during the survey process. It occurred one afternoon when a respondent who had just refused to be interviewed called the police and the responding officer, apparently not aware of the research study and the prior approval of the study by the city administrator and the police chief, arrested four of the interviewers. It was at this point that it was necessary to move back toward Josephson's (1970) "Community Support and Involvement," and Hessler and New's (1972) "Process of Exchange." A series of meetings which included the police chief, sheriff, city administrator and the local newspaper editor was arranged. These meetings resulted in the complete acceptance of the study by these leaders--mainly a result of the way in which the objectives and purposes of the study were stated. As a result, the local paper carried several articles describing and supporting the study. It is important to point out, however, that approximately 70 percent of the families included in the sample had already been interviewed prior to this incident. The interviewing of "earmarked resisters" was just getting underway. Nonetheless, this incident suggests that the low visibility procedure may not apply equally as well for surveys in urban areas--particularly those having complex governmental structures. Further, the fact that approximately 50 percent of the respondents included in the current survey was rural may partially explain the success of the survey.

A second possible reason for the success of the survey is that the respondents or community may not have perceived the study or the researchers as being a threat to their welfare--particularly among the white respondents. For example, since most of the staff was black and the performing institution was

predominantly black, it may have been the conviction of white respondents that there was nothing that the staff involved could do with the data that would harm them. Similarly, black respondents may not have viewed the survey as a form of exploitation of helpless or powerless minorities which gain little or nothing from the research by investigators for their own personal gains.

A final possible explanation for success is that this area had not been over-studied. Very few surveys, mainly the U.S. Census, had been conducted in this area prior to this study.

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